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NGOS, WORKING WITH UNITED NATIONS EVERYWHERE, OFTEN FAR AHEAD IN IDENTIFYING NEW THREATS, CONCERNS, DPI/NGO CONFERENCE TOLD

Statements by UN Secretary-General, Nobel Peace Laureate Shirin Ebadi Are Highlights of Closing Session

As the fifty-eighth Annual DPI/NGO Conference drew to a close this afternoon, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan urged civil society representatives to make themselves the guardians of the reform of the international system, tasked with monitoring developments at the country level and ensuring that world leaders produced real results in the years ahead.

Meeting on the eve of what was expected to be the largest gathering of world leaders in history, representatives of over 1,000 non-governmental and civil society organizations voiced their views on a range of issues, from peace and security and human rights, to implementing the Millennium Development Goals and strengthening the United Nations.

The Conference, organized by the Department of Public Information (DPI) in cooperation with associated non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and held in the run-up to next week's World Summit, was entitled "Our Challenge: Voices for Peace, Partnerships and Renewal".

Non-governmental organizations, the Secretary-General continued, were working with the United Nations everywhere, and were often far ahead in identifying new threats and concerns. That was one of their most important roles. What they said might be unpalatable today, but often became the conventional wisdom of tomorrow. On the eve of the World Summit, which was potentially of tremendous consequence for all peoples, NGOs had made a significant impact on the process in streets, stadiums and rallies around the world and at Headquarters.

In the sixtieth anniversary year, he added, the wisdom of the United Nations founders must be acknowledged, who made provisions for consultations with NGOs in the Charter. They had understood that close engagement with civil society was key to the Organization's health. Whether their main activity was helping to set policy at the global level or working with people in need, NGOs gave true meaning to the phrase "We the Peoples".

In her keynote address, Nobel Peace Laureate Shirin Ebadi said the most important function NGOs performed was to convey the needs, concerns and criticisms to the government, offer ideas to correct shortcomings or improve existing conditions. An essential attribute of an NGO was its independence from government. Such an attribute, when combined with popular appeal, was the guarantee of its authenticity and effectiveness.

The idea of the United Nations, she said, was based on the cooperation of governments, and the framers of the Charter assumed that governments represented their own people. But in reality that was not always the case. Some governments did not represent their people at all. The existence of that contradiction in the world organization was in part responsible for the difficulty of the United Nations to live up to its original purposes.

With regard to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, she said that too often those that served on the Commission were themselves violators of human rights. She suggested that the international human rights organizations, such as the International Federation of Human Rights, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, become voting members of the new body that would replace the Commission. International human rights organizations could act without fear of governments that activists in undemocratic countries had to deal with.

Prior to the closing session, the Conference held a discussion in which participants had an opportunity to voice their concerns and make recommendations on strengthening the United Nations in its sixtieth year. Speakers stressed the need for a strong, modern and efficient United Nations, and for the Secretary-General to be given the capacity and resources to carry out the necessary reforms.

The moderator of the discussion was Juan Somavia, Director-General, International Labour Organization (ILO), and the panelists were Cyril Ritchie, Vice-President of the NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations; Lars-Hjalmar Wide, General Assembly President-elect Jan Eliasson's Chef de Cabinet; and Melba Pria Olavarrieta, Chief of the Special Unit for Attention to NGOs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mexico.

During this morning's discussion on the future of the United Nations, General Assembly President Jean Ping noted that it was not possible to have a dialogue on the future of the United Nations which did not take into account the multipolar dimensions of all players, including civil society. International cooperation took place today through many State and non-State channels. The United Nations, for some years now, was opening up further to civil society. Among examples of that were the Assembly's informal hearings with representatives of NGOs, civil society and the private sector, held in June.

Other speakers in that segment were Johan Løvald, Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations; Bernice Romero, Advocacy Director, Oxfam International; and Mark Malloch Brown, Chef de Cabinet, Executive Office of the United Nations Secretary-General.

Also this morning the Conference held three simultaneous round tables. The first, moderated by Paul Van Tongeren, Executive Director, European Centre for Conflict Prevention, focused on envisioning a secure world, addressing such questions as who defined security and how to create common ground to build human security.

The panellists were Felicity Hill, Political Adviser on Nuclear and Disarmament Issues, Greenpeace International; Andre Kamenshikov, Executive Director, Non-violence International -- Newly Independent States; Anne O'Mahony, Regional Director, Concern Worldwide; Ljupco Jordanovski, President of the Assembly of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; and Georg Kell, Executive Director of the United Nations Global Compact Office.

The second round table, entitled "Eradicating Poverty: Timelines and Lifelines", enjoyed the participation of Uwem Robert Otu, President of the African Youth Movement based in Nigeria; Sylvan Barnett, representative to the United Nations of Rotary International; Ann Veneman, Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); Hicham El-Guerrouj, a professional athlete and UNICEF National Goodwill Ambassador for Morocco; and Hanifa Mezoui, Chief of the NGO Section of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

"Civil society and the United Nations" was the focus of the third round table, moderated by William Pace, Executive Director of the World Federalist Movement Institute for Global Policy. Also participating in that discussion were Paul Tennessee, Representative to the United Nations of the World Confederation of Labour and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU); Alejandra Scampini, Coordinator of Education Programmes, Lobbying and Advocacy, Red de Educación Popular entre Mujeres, Uruguay; and Martin Thümmel, First Secretary of Human Rights of the Permanent Mission of Germany to the United Nations.

During the afternoon session, the Conference adopted by acclamation a declaration, in which, among other things, participants reaffirmed their commitment to peace and security, and called on governments to abandon their narrow self-interests and work towards achieving a substantive outcome for next week's Summit.

Also making statements at the closing session were Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information Shashi Tharoor and Joseph Donnelly, Chair of the Conference.

Background

The fifty-eighth annual DPI/NGO Conference, entitled "Our Challenge: Voices for Peace, Partnerships and Renewal", met today to continue its session. The Conference was expected to focus today on the future of the United Nations, envisioning a secure world, and eradicating poverty, among other topics.

The Conference was expected to conclude this afternoon with keynote addresses by United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi.

Panel on Future of United Nations

JEAN PING, President of the fifty-ninth session of the General Assembly, said it was not possible to have a dialogue on the future of the United Nations which did not take into account the multipolar dimensions of all players, including civil society. International cooperation took place today through many State and non-State channels. The State was not alone in the world. New actors, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), now had a voice as a force of proposal and action, all with different levels of influence. The United Nations, for some years now, was opening up further to civil society.

Some examples in the past year of that change, he said, were the General Assembly's informal hearings with representatives of NGOs, civil society and the private sector in June, as well as the Global Conference of Presidents of World Parliaments taking place now. He also highlighted the importance of the DPI/NGO Conference, which for the first time, had set up round tables bringing together representatives of civil society, Member States and Presidents of World Parliaments to examine the decisions to be taken at the World Summit. All of which showed that dialogue on the future path of the Organization and the world's people was not only possible, but crucial. What was at stake was collective action on the major issues of the day.

He stressed that the international community, in the twenty-first century, could take a new turn, a more human direction, if all States, in close cooperation with all actors in the global community, managed to make dialogue a true virtue at the heart of international relations. Non-governmental organizations were a reservoir of expertise and human resources, which was lacking in many States. No effective action could be carried out without the participation of all actors.

JOHAN LØVALD (Norway) emphasized the need for real partnership between governments and NGOs, noting that government representatives must expand that partnership, otherwise progress on many issues would be much slower. In Norway, civil society was recognized as the country's backbone. Without its initiatives, development cooperation would never have gotten off the ground. Norway channelled most of its development assistance through civil society organizations. An important aspect of the partnership between government and civil society was its ability to strengthen development assistance in the global South. Norwegian NGOs had been working in various parts of the world for several decades and had gained valuable hands-on knowledge from which the Government benefited.

Regarding development, he said the role of civil society in achieving the Millennium Development Goals could not be stressed strongly enough. Non-governmental organizations were maintaining the focus on the Goals and pressing governments to keep their focus on the commitments made five years ago. Partnership at the national level was essential if NGOs were to be heard at the international level. Civil society and other stakeholders must be included in the work of the United Nations, which, in turn, would strengthen its integrity. With growing NGO participation in the Organization's work, funding would be increasingly important in order to maintain consultations with them.

There was a need primarily to work globally and primarily with governments in order to attain the Millennium Goals, he said, emphasizing the necessity to build functioning States and governments, as well as working public sectors. One example of consultation with civil society was that of Norway and several other States that were working to establish a commission on the legal empowerment of the poor, which would be launched next Tuesday. In preparation for the establishment of that commission, Norway had emphasized the need to include civil society and was seeking inputs from a wide range of NGOs. Without civil society, it would be impossible to attain the Millennium Goals. Non-governmental organizations were needed as actors in the field, as advocates, as well as the voices and watchdogs of the poor.

BERNICE ROMERO, Advocacy Director, Oxfam International, wanted to focus on the need for partnerships and dialogue, such as that exemplified by NGOs and their partners, to be emulated by Member States in order to reach a meaningful outcome at next week's World Summit. There were thousands of challenges that directly affected the citizens of all countries and were beyond the control of any one government alone. The United Nations had proved the most durable forum for international cooperation to tackle those challenges and aspire to the goal of saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war. The World Summit would be a vital opportunity for governments to reaffirm their commitment to the Millennium Goals and to the United Nations. That would only happen if they overcame their differences and reached agreement.

Oxfam International, she said, was proud to be a contributor to the Global Call to Action against Poverty, and to international small arms campaigns. Civil society groups had come together around common aims, representing a breadth of alliances that reflected heightened collaboration. In the run-up to the World Summit, civil society was looking to Member States to emulate such collaboration. So far, what was being seen was something quite different, with haggling and efforts to water down the outcome document. Despite their commitments at the Millennium Summit, Northern governments were still reluctant to take the necessary steps to assist the countries of the South. Civil society was looking to an end to endless debate and watered down commitments. The message of civil society to Member States was that the current process was not just a drafting exercise but an opportunity for real change.

To make the Summit meaningful, there needed to be at least four key commitments, she stated. First, governments must agree to the collective responsibility to protect citizens from atrocities, such as genocide and crimes against humanity. Second, governments must commit to the Millennium Goals by committing to aid, trade and debt relief, as well as a commitment to universal access to HIV/AIDS treatment and the economic empowerment of women. Third, governments must agree to the establishment of a legally binding agreement on small arms. Fourth, governments must agree to improve the international response to all humanitarian disasters, including by increasing the timely provision of funds.

MARK MALLOCH BROWN, Chef de Cabinet, Executive Office of the United Nations Secretary-General, said it was enormously important to ensure that the Summit was expanded beyond its normal audience and that civil society was as broadly represented as possible. Despite the limited civil society participation in the Summit proper, a much stronger civil society voice must be heard. The Summit hung by a thread as diplomats sought to drain the outcome document of all purpose, meaning and substance and to kill global ideas of global human importance such as development, security and human rights. All that must be punctured in order for the Summit to come out with a document that addressed what people all over the world were demanding. It was up to all NGOs and civil society, collectively and in a unified voice, to challenge the summitters to hear their constituencies and rise to the occasion.

He said NGOs had a tremendous opportunity to upstage States in the next few days because what they said to their membership at home and to the media offered a clarion call that could critically push the teetering outcome document towards success and away from failure. The high hopes of the past years must not be forgotten. Far from being the mere culmination of the past five years of calls and appeals for the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals, this year also marked the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the United Nations.

There was a need to address development and security in a broader way that understood that the conditions that bred terrorism could not be ignored and a real understanding of the importance of human rights. Those ideas and the underlying platform for their delivery, as well as the wider United Nations reform, were under attack.

The Volcker report made sorry reading, he said. This was a time for apology but also, much more importantly, for a renewal of United Nations management because beyond the report lay a much larger institutional failure. Member States had starved the Organization of the means to respond to such challenges as oil-for-food and last December's tsunami. Perhaps avian flu was still to come. Huge expectations were set at the door of the United Nations, but not the means with which to fulfil them. The Organization faced a possible summit of empty words and broken promises, and in the next 48 hours civil society must push the summiteers to produce a document of which they could all be proud and which could make them feel as they went back home that they had made a difference. Compromises would not be enough. Civil society, by making such a contribution, could earn its place as a full partner of the United Nations.

Discussion

Asked how NGOs could make a difference in the next few days to impact the Summit's outcome, Mr. LØVALD said he was hopeful that there was still a broad majority that wanted a substantial result. The problem was that that broad majority was sometimes too quiet. It was important that countries that supported the outcome document "stand up, be counted and speak up". Non-governmental organizations should use their networks and intensify dialogue with their governmental representatives.

Ms. ROMERO added that it was necessary to show that there was a constituency for the issues at hand. She was not sure that NGOs had been effective in sending the message that there was a constituency for poverty eradication. In the next few days, NGOs should use their contacts in the media to get opinions published. That would send the message that people cared enough for such messages to be in their papers. The usual methods of letters and calls should also be used.

As for the key provisions that must be in the document, she reiterated the need for a commitment to the collective responsibility to protect civilians; a commitment to the Millennium Goals and timetables to meeting their provisions; some language on a binding agreement on the arms trade; and reform of humanitarian assistance.

Asked how to ensure that the NGO community was inclusive, she suggested the need to "preach a little bit to ourselves what we preach to our leaders", as well as for NGOs to question themselves on how representative they were and reaching out to people to bring them in. Non-governmental organizations must acknowledge that they too were elitist sometimes in their own way.

For a successful Summit outcome, Mr. MALLOCH BROWN stressed the need for compromise between different baskets of issues. Developing countries wanted a strong outcome focused on the Millennium Goals. Many wanted a strong security component, including the Peacebuilding Commission; a definition of terrorism; the Human Rights Council; and management reform of the United Nations, giving the Secretary-General the authority to revamp management and the capacity to deal with new challenges. Everybody needed to drop the pettiness and "get with the programme".

Round Table 1 -- 'Envisioning a Secure World'

Moderated by PAUL VAN TONGEREN, Executive Director, European Centre for Conflict Prevention, the discussion focused on questions such as who defined security, how to create common ground to build human security, and how to enhance one's own security while ensuring security for others.

At the outset, he pointed out that the sustainable security of States could only be based on the security of people. The vision of human security could lead to a shift in the security paradigm from one based on power and military strength to one of mutual interdependence. As Secretary-General Kofi Annan had stated, the world must advance the cause of security, development and human rights together. Humanity would not enjoy security without development, would not enjoy development without security, and would not enjoy either without respect for human rights.

There was need for a shift from reacting to conflicts to preventing conflicts, he added. The United Nations needed to be more proactive in preventing violent conflicts. Also, United Nations leadership in conflict prevention and peacebuilding was crucial. In that connection, an under-secretary-general on peace and security was absolutely needed. Also, the United Nations should engage in partnerships with civil society in the field of peace and security.

FELICITY HILL, Political Adviser on Nuclear and Disarmament Issues, Greenpeace International, noted that security had traditionally been understood in military terms, as something guaranteed by States to citizens. However, the vast majority of people on the planet were not economically or physically secure. Greenpeace approached security with a question -- "what planet are you on?" "Our planet" today was one where half of the forests were destroyed; where 75 per cent of fish stocks had been depleted; and the climate was changing fast.

The real question was whether political change could keep up with climate change to protect the planet, she continued. The planet Earth was giving clear signs that any security concept that did not take into account the security of the environment would not be viable. It was hard to feel more secure today than the founders of Greenpeace did in 1971.

She added that essential for any improvement of the Security Council was dispensing with the concept of permanency and the veto power. She recalled that Article 26 of the United Nations Charter had required that the Security Council develop a plan for the least diversion of human and economic resources to armaments. Instead, the Council's permanent members had engaged in arms races and profiteering. "It was time to get on with disarmament."

Touching on the role of civil society in conflict prevention and security, ANDRE KAMENSHIKOV, Executive Director, Non-violence International – Newly Independent States, said there was a lot that could be done at the international level to make interaction with local civil society actors in conflict areas more effective. He noted that when there was an issue concerning the need for food aid, for example, there was someone from the international system to turn to at the local level. But when there was a case of preventing violence, who was there to turn to?

He said almost all the United Nations agencies and international organizations were represented at the local level, but there was no one to turn to when speaking of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. He emphasized the need for something with a strong operational arm, such as a United Nations peacebuilding agency, with the mandate and capacity to work locally.

ANNE O'MAHONY, Regional Director, Concern Worldwide, noted that over 90 per cent of the deaths in conflict areas were not from the perpetrators but as a consequence of the conflict, the root causes of which were poverty and the abuse of human rights. Violence was a result of poverty. For example, an increase in the price of bread in the Sudan in 1983 had triggered a conflict that lasted over 20 years. Afghanistan, a proud nation brought to its knees by decades of violence, was now resurging, but would need long-term support in establishing peace and democracy.

She emphasized that, unless addressed, the cycle of violence and poverty would continue to be repeated. There was a unique opportunity with the World Summit that could not be wasted or missed. If missed, then the international community would have failed in its responsibilities and obligations, and the real losers would be the poor.

Sharing the experiences of the Balkan region, LJUPCO JORDANOVSKI, President of the Assembly of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, said that among the challenges faced by the modern world was maintaining peace and security. It was astonishing that people had not learned the lessons of the two world wars of the previous century. Among the steps he suggested to ensure security was to redefine the concepts of sovereignty and nation-States, in light of human rights protection.

The Executive Director of the United Nations Global Compact Office, GEORG KELL, reflected on the role of business in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Commerce was often a force for peace, but it could also be the cause for disruptions. Violence was a cost element and a barrier to investment. It was also true that much depended on how business was conducted. There remained a tremendous gap in available tools and incentives to bring about a shift in the mindset of corporations. In addition, the role of business in conflict had so far not attracted the political attention it deserved.

The question-and-answer session focused on, among other things, the need for the United Nations to address the issue of genocide, the urgent need to establish nuclear-weapon-free zones in the Middle East and North Asia, and the need to integrate peacebuilding in various activities.

Round Table 2 -- 'Eradicating Poverty: Timeliness and Lifelines'

Water was a key engine driving human development as well as a human right that must be publicly regulated to make it accessible and affordable for all, Uwem ROBERT OTU, President of the African Youth Movement based in Nigeria, told a round-table session entitled "Eradicating Poverty: Timelines and Lifelines" this morning, as part of the fifty-eighth Annual DPI/NGO Conference.

This year, economically exploitable water would run out in some critical areas; by 2025, two thirds of the world's population could face severe water shortages, Mr. Otu said. Water privatization had tended to benefit the political and economic elite, including national and transnational corporations, without addressing crucial issues of equity, sustainability and institutions.

Corruption was rampant, and privatization in four states in Nigeria had resulted in increased water tariffs and the severing of water services to poor and marginalized groups unable to support the higher fees.

While water should not necessarily be free of charge, he continued, it should be managed through public-public partnerships and not subjected to conditions imposed by the World Bank, investment facilities and bilateral donors. Water consumers must be informed about water costs and given leverage in the decision-making process to set water tariffs and subsidies. His organization was partnering with other non-governmental groups to support integrated water resource management such as the Better Life Programme for Rural Women, the Stockholm International Water Institute, and Groups against Corruption in Africa. In addition, 15 Nigerian non-governmental organizations were working with Clean-Up Australia to develop hygienic waste disposal systems and to study consumer waste disposal patterns in cities throughout Nigeria.

Improving the lot of the poor was also contingent upon improving socio-economic opportunities for women, he said, noting that Nigeria's Federal Ministry for Women's Affairs and Social Affairs had scored several successes in educating, training and mobilizing women nationwide to promote better living standards, improved family planning and health care, higher literacy rates and women's entrepreneurship.

SYLVAN BARNETT, Representative to the United Nations of Rotary International, agreed, stressing that economic self-sufficiency, particularly among women in rural Africa, was key to poverty eradication. Rotary International had helped set up microcredit banks and revolving loan funds for female clients, school lunch programmes for children, and farmer training programmes in rural areas in Africa. His organization was actively engaged in programmes worldwide to achieve all the Millennium Development Goals, he said, including targets to reduce and eliminate maternal mortality.

ANN VENEMAN, Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), said 315 million people could be lifted out of poverty, especially in Africa, if countries followed through on their commitments to implement the millennium targets. An estimated 1.1 billion people still lived on less than \$1 per day, and at the current rate of progress, 44 countries would not be able to meet child development goals by the 2015 target year. Next month, UNICEF would announce a major global initiative to stem the direct impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on children, including the orphan crisis and the reduction in children education. Next week, it would launch an initiative intended to address maternal development and health. Progress, she stressed, would require greater commitments at the country level.

HICHAM EL-GUERROUJ, a professional athlete and UNICEF National Goodwill Ambassador for Morocco, said sports played a major role in human development, peacebuilding and poverty alleviation. Children active in sports were more likely to develop healthy lifestyles and less likely to do drugs, smoke and become delinquents. Studies by the World Health Organization (WHO) had revealed that each dollar invested in sports represented a saving of \$3 in medical costs. Sports taught perseverance, teamwork and reinforced the value of fair competition -- important lessons for conflict-resolution, collective action, democracy and tolerance. Sports promoted gender equality, allowing young girls and women to build self-confidence and demonstrate leadership, and created economic and educational opportunities for impoverished youth. According to the World Bank, the \$36 billion global sports industry was growing 3 per cent to 5 per cent annually.

However, sports as a tool for development was not sufficiently capitalized, he continued, stressing that decision-makers, particularly in developing countries, were not the issue. Civil society had yet to fully understand its potential as a strategy for socio-economic development. Discrimination still held women back, particularly in rural and impoverished regions.

HANIFA MEZOUÏ, Chief of the NGO Section of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, also made a statement.

Round Table 3 -- 'Civil Society and the United Nations

Civil society's current status in the United Nations was too limited and must be strengthened in order for the United Nations to achieve its stated goal and chart its future course, speakers from several NGOs said this afternoon during a round-table session entitled "Civil Society and the United Nations" as part of the fifty-eighth Annual DPI Conference.

While civil society organizations enjoyed consultative roles through their affiliation with the United Nations through the Economic and Social Council and the Department of Public Information (DPI), such organizations were denied consultative and advisory roles in key decision-making organs such as the General Assembly and the Security Council, said PAUL TENNASSEE, representative to the United Nations of the World Confederation of Labour and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). That fact was a major deficiency in the relationship between civil society groups, the United Nations and other international organizations.

ALEJANDRA SCAMPINI, Coordinator of Education Programmes, Lobbying and Advocacy of the Red de Educación Popular entre Mujeres in Uruguay and a representative of the Feminist Task Force of the Global Call to Action against Poverty, stressed the need for representatives of civil society to work together to become a part of the new UN system. While progress had been made throughout the preceding decades, especially regarding the role of women and gender equality, the results were not sufficient. Civil society and the people of the world must work together to help create a more credible UN, capable of sustaining a more democratic world.

WILLIAM PACE, Executive Director of the World Federalist Movement Institute for Global Policy, said new relationships must be forged in order to provide for a wider range of voices in the UN system. Civil society participation was essential in helping to determine the future of the United Nations. He emphasized that without greater access and influence in the United Nations, the voice of civil society was likely to remain unheard.

MARTIN THÜMMEL, First Secretary of Human Rights of the Permanent Mission of Germany to the United Nations, stressed that while the role of civil society has recently become more prominent in the UN system, civil society must demand an expansion of formal relationships with the United Nations far beyond the Economic and Social Council and DPI relations. Formal relationships must exist, not only with NGOs and civil society in the North, but also with those organizations in the South who find it difficult to come to the United Nations to make their voices heard.

The speakers agreed that civil society needed to assume a more dominant role within the United Nations and that the United Nations of the future must work closely with civil society to include the voices of the people of the world.

It was also agreed that the current inclusion of civil society in the UN system was not sufficient and that perhaps civil society could somehow establish itself within the General Assembly. Only with the inclusion of the voices of governments and civil society could the United Nations establish itself as a necessary organization dedicated to the people of the world.

Afternoon Discussion -- Spare No Effort: 2015 Is Now

JUAN SOMAVIA, Director-General, International Labour Organization (ILO), said that compared to when he was last here, governments were now having a less open attitude towards civil society organizations and NGOs. That was short-sighted. The 1990s had witnessed the benefits of an open-door policy towards civil society. The process under way was one where the international community of governments was slowly moving into a global community of diverse actors, including State institutions, NGOs, business and trade unions. It was clear that none of them individually could solve all problems.

The ILO, he noted, was the only international organization that had governments, employers and workers dealing together with the issue of social justice at work. The future involved a new institutional design towards increased dialogue. If today's institutions did not move in that direction, then there was a move in the direction of a "dialogue divide". Also, it was necessary to focus on "the local" in discussions. When "the local" was not developed, then people moved, and that eventually led to increased migration.

He said his greatest worry was that there was not enough recognition in the international community of the fact that the single most serious political issue faced by every country was the job crisis. The political consequences of that were pervasive. In 10 years, official unemployment had grown by 25 per cent. About 90 per cent of the new jobs created were in the informal sector and, therefore, unprotected. Also, the unemployment rate of youth was three times that of adults. That was an area in which civil society organizations could play a very important advocacy role.

CYRIL RITCHIE, Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations, said the NGOs needed to help governments interpret the United Nations ideals and values. Without civil society engagement, the United Nations could not meet the aspirations of the world's peoples. He had no doubt that when civil society pledged to "spare no effort", it meant 100 per cent. Civil society was engaged daily in protecting the environment, combating the spread of small arms, promoting human rights, monitoring good governance, creating economic opportunities for the poor, and fighting trafficking. Civil society organizations were permanent public defenders of those and thousands of other causes designed to make the world better. Yet, when heads of State and Government said they planned to spare no effort, did they do so with the same conviction? At the many United Nations conferences since 1972, governments had pledged action to save the world from itself. The world's politicians were debasing their own standards when they failed to do the things they said they would do.

Political will, the essential ingredient in implementing decisions, was often lacking, he said. A strong United Nations organization with a Secretary-General that had the authority to run the Organization free of "ambassadorial micromanagement" was also needed. The United Nations also needed adequate funding to do what governments wanted it to do. As the hopes of people everywhere, the United Nations needed a budget that allowed those hopes to be realized.

Civil society had to speak up for the peoples of the world by letting leaders know that it was their human obligation to honour their word, including financially. He would not be reluctant to remind them that the millions of members and supporters who made up civil society were also voters.

LARS-HJALMAR WIDE, General Assembly President-elect Jan Eliasson's Chef de Cabinet, said dialogue with civil society was a high priority for the incoming Assembly President. The agenda being worked on in preparation for the outcome document was a complex and far-reaching one. Even though the outcome document would not be perfect, he hoped it would provide a good point of departure for the future work of the Organization. Regarding the issues under negotiation, he said the United Nations needed better machinery for human rights. Also important was the Peacebuilding Commission; a modern and efficient United Nations Secretariat; and the need to send a strong message on fulfilling the Millennium Goals. The Summit also needed to send a clear, strong message on terrorism, including the need for a comprehensive convention on the issue.

The aim of the President-elect was to follow up on the resolutions on the Assembly's revitalization, he continued. Also, he would work to set up an open-ended group to streamline and rationalize the Assembly's agenda, as well as attempt to have more interactive debates. Mr. Eliasson's intention was to consider each and every initiative in terms of how it would work in the field and translate itself into real action.

MELBA PRIA OLAVARRIETA, Chief of the Special Unit for Attention to Non-Governmental Organizations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mexico, said there was a new agenda. The Millennium Development Goals were only a part of that agenda. War and peace were still on the agenda. Since the United Nations' founding, new actors were on the scene. There were new social and civil actors. There was also a new power balance. Multilateral solutions were needed for the problems on the global agenda. Non-governmental organizations needed to learn how to negotiate. They also needed to learn how to strike a balance between working within the United Nations and working to change it. Non-governmental organizations also had the same role in national governments. Governments were in power, but their power only lasted as long as political terms lasted. Governments only represented majorities, however. Civil society was vital for moving forward the different agendas. Agenda-setting for governments and NGOs was not the same thing, as NGOs did not have the same leverage or speed.

There were many niches available for NGOs, she said, adding that NGOs needed to focus their work. Non-governmental organizations needed to have clear goals and needed to work locally first. International issues must be made a part of local political campaigns. Non-governmental organizations had come a long way, but the road was winding and long.

Discussion

Responding to a question on the impact of multinational corporations on poverty, Mr. RITCHIE said that such corporations impacted poverty in that they created jobs, which led to decreasing poverty. It was what surrounded the involvement of corporations that was of concern. There were many efforts, not least the United Nations Global Compact, to bring multinational corporations to the accountability table and to promote corporate social responsibility. That was key in harnessing the potential of big business for job creation. He was strongly in favour of enhancing the standards of corporate responsibility.

As to why the current draft negotiations were so difficult, he noted that it could be because the ambassadors involved were instructed to advance their national interests rather than seek to further the causes of the international community.

Asked how the current draft outcome document would be different from past outcomes, Mr. WIDE said it was different because it contained a lot of detail on the issues under consideration. If adopted, heads of State and Government would take some decisive decisions and establish timelines for their implementation.

On the issue of job creation, Mr. SOMAVIA said the big issue was that sometimes governments did not have job creation as a priority. What governments must do was to make decent work a policy objective and not the eventual result of economic policies. Growth was not enough because many governments had growth, but could not generate employment. There was nothing crazy about having jobs-led economic growth in a country.

He pointed to a disconnect between global economic policies and what was going on at the local level. In addition, the system of international organizations was underperforming on the issue of job creation. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Bank had expertise on the issue, but were unable to work together on it.

Ms. PRIA said NGOs could not only be the bridge between the United Nations and everything else, but they had to be.

On the issue of State sovereignty, she highlighted the need to find a balance between sovereignty and the responsibility of the international community to intervene.

Closing Session

SHASHI THAROOR, Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, said it had been a remarkable day and a remarkable period in the United Nations history. It was clear that there would be the opening of a new phase of civil society engagement with the United Nations. It was also clear that all looked forward to joining campaigns to advance a shared agenda.

The Secretary-General was a strong advocate of the things civil society valued, namely, human security, human development and human rights, Mr. Tharoor said. He was also a great human being. It was a testimony to the importance of the United Nations relationship with civil society that at his busiest time, on the eve of the Summit of world leaders, the Secretary-General had insisted on addressing the Conference.

KOFI ANNAN, Secretary-General of the United Nations, said it was a great pleasure to join the meeting today. The remarkable turnout of civil society at this year's Conference -- the biggest in its history -- was yet another proof of its commitment to the United Nations global mission. He thanked all for coming, especially those who had travelled long distances.

He said it was nearly nine years since he had taken office, and many things had defined that period for the United Nations, including the situation in Iraq, the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals, the process of United Nations reform, and the establishment of the International Criminal Court. One of the most notable changes had been the NGO revolution. The mass mobilization around the Group of 8 Summit in July was just the latest example of that. The Nobel Peace Prize continued the welcome trend of recognizing NGOs for their contribution to peace, disarmament and democracy. Just two weeks ago, in the Niger, he had witnessed United Nations agencies, programmes and funds doing what they did best -- helping people in need. He had been pleased to see how well they worked with their NGO partners. There was a long way to go in meeting the needs there, and similar crises loomed in other parts of Africa. Without NGOs, it would not be possible to respond to any of those crises.

There was also much work to do in the Sudan, he continued. There, too, NGOs had been indispensable partners. When he had visited Darfur in May, he had been accompanied by the leaders of Concern, Refugees International and the International Rescue Committee, who had been able to offer invaluable perspectives on the situation. He paid tribute to the NGOs that had braved threatening environments to bring not only relief, but also reconciliation and human rights and other contributions to the Sudanese peace process. The truth was that the NGOs were working with the United Nations everywhere, and were often far ahead in identifying new threats and concerns. That was one of their most important roles. What they said might be unpalatable today, but often became the conventional wisdom of tomorrow.

On the eve of the World Summit, which was potentially of tremendous consequence for all peoples, NGOs had made a significant impact on the process in streets, stadiums and rallies around the world and at Headquarters, he said. While they might feel that their voices disappeared, last June's hearings marked a welcome step in the way the United Nations related to civil society. The outcome document bore the stamp of those discussions.

This week, civil society had returned the favour by giving a platform to an unprecedented number of government representatives to participate in the Conference, he said. That dialogue must continue. The Annual Conference should remain a venue for candid exchanges between civil society, Member States and the Secretariat. Ultimately, the struggle was for tangible progress on the things that most concerned the world's people. That meant strengthening efforts to implement the Millennium Goals. There needed to be a balanced outcome document that met every country's concerns, from terrorism to post-conflict reconstruction and United Nations reform. Only such an outcome could provide a solid basis for collective action.

In the last week, he had urged ambassadors to remember that in today's world, the collective interest was often the national interest, he said. Serious discussions were going on, and if Member States were going to get a meaningful outcome, there would need to be more give and take. The clock was ticking. He was concerned that, despite some signs of progress, the deadline would be missed. He would be happy to be proved wrong. Whatever was decided, the United Nations could not move ahead on its own. All had a key role to play.

Non-governmental organizations needed to closely review what happened next, he said. They must also monitor developments at the country level and ensure that leaders produced real results in the years ahead. They must also make themselves the guardians of the reform of the international system.

In the sixtieth anniversary year, the wisdom of the United Nations founders, who made provisions for consultations with NGOs in the Charter, must be acknowledged. They had understood that close engagement with civil society was key to the Organization's health. Whether their main activity was helping to set policy at the global level or working with people in need, NGOs gave true meaning to the phrase "We the Peoples".

In a keynote address, SHIRIN EBADI, founder and former President, National Association in Support of Children's Rights; President, Human Rights Defence Centre, Iran; and 2004 Nobel Laureate, said NGOs represented the mediating force between the general public and the government. The most important function they performed was to convey the needs, concerns and criticisms to the government, offer ideas to correct shortcomings or improve existing conditions. An essential attribute of an NGO was its independence from government. Such an attribute, when combined with popular appeal, was the guarantee of its authenticity and effectiveness.

Independence, she said, did not mean that NGOs could not receive assistance from their own or other governments. Rather, acceptance of such assistance should not influence their autonomy and non-partisanship. Independence did not mean that NGOs could disregard existing judicial norms and consider themselves above the law, but rather as having the right to do their work and be free to interact with all interested individuals, civic groups and each other without fear of government intimidation. When NGOs pursued their goals in a peaceful manner, governments had no right to interfere in their projects and activities.

Citing her own experiences, she recalled that, a number of years ago, she had joined with others to establish the Centre for Human Rights. For the past three years, the Centre had tried to register with the government authorities but had been repeatedly denied. Also, during that period, the Centre had become part of the International Federation of Human Rights and was the recipient of the 2003 Human Rights Award from the French National Commission of Human Rights. In addition, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Yet, the Government of Iran, without offering any reason and in violation of its own laws, had refused to grant recognition to the Centre.

She said that in societies where governments obstructed the work of NGOs, open international support for NGO organizers and pressure on the State to respect their independence were crucial steps towards the democratic process. It was necessary to begin to evaluate the laws of a country and the conduct of its officials in relation to their impact on national NGOs, and treat any intrusive legislation on their activities as a violation of their human rights.

Another method undemocratic governments used to undermine the credibility and effectiveness of NGOs was to use their names for groups of their own creation, she said. Members of such government-controlled NGOs were then sent to international gatherings to issue false reports and raise irrelevant questions in order to distract public attention from the dismal human rights record of those in power. Such groups actually presented the agenda of the autocratic State while pretending to be bipartisan and preventing the true voice of the people from reaching the international community.

The idea of the United Nations, she said, was based on the cooperation of governments, and the framers of the Charter assumed that governments represented their own people. But in reality that was not always the case. Some governments did not represent their people at all.

The existence of that contradiction in the world organization was in part responsible for the difficulty of the United Nations to live up to its original purposes.

With regard to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, she said that too often those that served on the Commission were themselves violators of human rights. Some countries had not signed or ratified major human rights conventions, such as the Conventions on the discrimination against women and on torture. She joined those who questioned the right of such countries to evaluate the human rights situations of others and supported the Secretary-General's reform proposal in that regard. She also suggested that the international human rights organizations, such as the International Federation of Human Rights, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, become voting members of the new body that would replace the Commission. International human rights organizations could act without fear of governments that activists in undemocratic countries had to deal with.

She was aware that some governments did not want to strengthen the United Nations by making its decision-making mechanism more democratic. The challenges faced required thinking idealistically and acting pragmatically. It was well known that significant human accomplishments often began with a dream.

In closing remarks, Mr. THAROOR noted the feverish negotiations going on in the last few days. No one was under illusions as to why the negotiations had taken priority, even at the expense of the NGOs' scheduled activities. What they were discussing was no less than the future of the United Nations system. As the highly charged NGO meetings had made clear, civil society voices were being heard, including by the Secretary-General. Their message had been crystal clear: Member States must do the right thing and the Summit must be a worthy event. That meant reaffirming the importance of the issues underlined in the last few days, including delivering on the Millennium Development Goals, working for poverty eradication, acknowledging the responsibility to protect, honouring their views on human rights, and enshrining them in international law and norms. Non-governmental organizations had been clear in letting the world know that United Nations reform must strengthen the Organization to meet the tremendous challenges ahead. Non-governmental organizations wanted to see the United Nations equipped with the human, physical and moral tools to get the job done. They were the Organization's support, backbone and always its conscience.

The views expressed by NGOs had the support of the Secretary-General, the General Assembly President and a host of other United Nations officials, he said. The clear expression of what civil society expected would encourage those struggling with negotiations in the few days before the Summit. He thanked participants for demonstrating their solidarity. He also thanked Joseph Donnelly for leading the Conference with vision and passion.

In closing remarks, Conference Chairman JOSEPH DONNELLY said it had been a unique honour to work on the Conference for the last year. The 1,788 registrants who had arrived from 86 countries out of 124 registered, and from 698 organizations of the 1,200 registered, had conquered some of the silence. The question was what voice had been heard and what new voice would each take home to ensure that every voice was heard. It had been more than a numbers game. Non-governmental organizations had faced many challenges, but they had also passed through many doors. There was much more to do, however. The final report would be filled with many recommendations.

The Conference would be recorded as a critical moment when needs and challenges met in full force to ensure for the world's 6 billion people that the Summit opportunity would not be squandered. The moment had been seized.

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